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KURD CULTURAL SUMMARY

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THE KURDS

Orientation

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The term Kurds refers to a number of closely related Moslem tribes speaking similar dialects and inhabiting the mountainous crescent that stretches from the Euphrates in northern Syria and Turkey to Kermanshah in Persia. This area is commonly referred to as Kurdistan. Kurdistan has neither political nor geographical unity being a semi-continuous territory divided among the modern states of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and the U.S.S.R. In 1920, at the treaty of Sèvres, it was initially proposed that Kurdistan be made a political unit. The proposal was dropped, however, and Kurdistan never came into being as a nation. Most of the region is in the high mountains of the Armenian Knot and the Zagros Range, but it also extends into the foothills and the plains of northern Iraq. The Kurdish tribes are historically ancient. They are probably descended from people known variously as Guti, Qurti, and Karduchoi who were living in the area at about 2000 B.C. They are also assumed to be the same Carduks (Karduchoi) who harried the retreat of Xenophon's army in 400 B.C.

Modern Kurdish nationalism places great emphasis on the unity of the language. The Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-European stock and is very similar to Persian. At the same time it exhibits

105 features which suggest a process of parallel development and borrowing rather than recent splitting. At present there are three major dialects spoken by the various Kurdish tribes. Estimates for the total population of the Kurds have ranged from 1.5 million to 4 million. The Royal Institute of International Affairs gives a figure of 3 million including those living in the U.S.S.R. The largest single concentration is on the Turkish-Iraqi border where they number approximately 2 million. The census of Iraq for the year 1947 listed 1 million Kurds concentrated in the north and northeast of that country. A great many Kurds are urbanized, Arabized or Turkicized and are Kurdish by descent only.

The large majority of the Kurds belong to the Shafi'i school of Sunnite Moslems. In Persia several tribes belong to the radical Shi'ite sect of Ahl-i-Hakk or Ali Ilahi. Though the Kurds were early converts to Islam, independent Kurdish principalities attained some degree of organization only after the fall of the Abbasside Caliphate (around 1200). They generally played a minor role except for producing Saladin at the time of the third Crusade. A large part of Kurdish territory was conquered by Sultan Selim I (1500), but even then they managed to retain considerable local autonomy leading to adjustment rather than replacement of traditional Kurdish organization.

Economy

The Kurds today exhibit a considerable diversity in their economic patterns ranging from pure nomads to settled farmers. This diversity of economic patterns is reflected in their social organization. Many urban

105 Kurds have been partially assimilated into the various national cultures where they reside. The overwhelming majority, though, are subsistence farmers, many of whom practice localized transhumance. These farmers live in what is essentially a feudal situation. Subsistence among the settled population is based on cereal agriculture combined with herding. Wheat and barley are of approximately equal importance; rice, peas, lentils, and garden vegetables are secondary. Tobacco is the major cash crop. Goats and sheep are the important domestic animals, and their goat hair, wool, and dairy products are always in demand in adjacent towns. Rough carpets and cloth for the national costume are woven by both nomads and villagers. Cattle are kept more for their use as work animals in plowing and threshing than for their products. Donkeys generally are used only as a means of transportation. Some horses are kept, but these are definitely luxury animals and only the rich can afford them. In most cases productive techniques in agriculture are underdeveloped with the result that the per capita yield is very low. The nomads move within prescribed territories following their herds of goats and sheep into the mountains in summer and down to the plains in winter.

The daily diet of the majority of the Kurds is built around bread, dairy produce (especially curdled milk called mast), dates, tea, and sugar. The wealthy have a more varied diet and consume more rice, meat, and fruits; pork and alcoholic beverages are tabooed.

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Clothing

The Kurds are notable for their elaborate and colorful national costume, in which they use both imported and locally woven fabrics. Briefly, the man's costume consists of baggy colored trousers and a plain shirt with bags sleeves split at the wrist and tied above the elbow. Over the shirt is worn a very colorfully embroidered vest. The waist is bound with a large fringed sash tied in heavy folds and used to hold tobacco, money, and the traditional dagger. A skullcap is worn on the head and over it two rolled scarves are bound to form a heavy turban. The women's dress is heavily and brightly embroidered. They do not use the veil, although a head scarf is worn. In towns, many Kurds have either modified or completely abandoned the traditional dress in favor of Western-style clothing.

Social Organization

Throughout Kurdistan, two basic and distinctive types of social organization are found: a tribal system based on descent, and a feudal system based on class and land ownership. All nomadic tribes belong to the first type (descent), while the settled population may be dichotomized between those of freeholding, tribally organized farmers (descent) and those of semi-feudal sharecropping tenants (feudal). The feudal type village structure is being progressively assimilated into the modern structure of the state and is difficult to evaluate at this time. The intricacies of the class and near-caste systems and differential contacts and reactions

105 due to many subcultures, reader analysis of the Kurdish towns (which also serve as trade and administrative centers) too complex to permit valid generalizations. The rural areas on the other hand show greater uniformity in patterns; the tribal areas are organized and separable and the villagers in their small endogamous communities have strong patterns of localism and traditionalism.

In the tribal village, each farmer generally owns and works his own field or hires outside labor to assist him. Mutual renting or borrowing of livestock may occur, especially in harvest time when cattle are used for threshing. The grazing areas belong to the village as a whole, and herding the individually owned animals is usually delegated to one or more full-time shepherds, serving the whole community. The village is made up of individual households that are economically independent. Each household typically consists of one nuclear family, although some may include an extended patrilineal family. The division of labor within the house is very clear-cut and follows the traditional rural pattern of men working the fields and women attending to the household chores.

Marriage

Marriage patterns are based on Koranic law. A man is forbidden to marry any of his father's wives, his daughter or granddaughter, his mother's sister, his father's sister, his sister, his brother's daughter, his mother-in-law or his stepdaughter, or any woman who was nursed by the woman who nursed him (be it his own mother or an unrelated wet nurse).

105 At the same time it is recommended by the Koran that he marry within the kin group. The Kurds, like all Moslems, practice close family endogamy with preferential father's brother's daughter (parallel cousin) marriage. Statistically, this type of marriage is also most prevalent. Bride price is not fixed but varies with the wealth and the status of the families involved. The bride price is usually lower for father's brother's daughter than for less preferred arrangements. Another prevalent marriage pattern is for two men to exchange sisters thus eliminating the bride price completely. Marriages are usually festive occasions accompanied by public feasting and dancing by the men. The women take no part in the public celebration or dancing but hold their own celebration within the house. Although polygamy is allowed by Islam, plural wives are rather uncommon except among a few wealthy individuals. The levirate is frequently practiced, but more as a convenience, especially where there are children, than as an established rule or right. The sororate is not known as a marriage practice. Following the Moslem pattern, the male has the right to divorce his wife at any time and no reasons need be advanced. After divorce, the woman goes back to her father's house leaving the children (unless very young) with the father. (Procedure for divorce and remarriage, settlements, inheritance laws, etc. follows the Moslem religious law, Al-Shari'a. For a detailed description see Levy 1962.)

Postmarital residence is ideally patrilocal. The typical household however usually contains one nuclear family, indicating a trend towards

105 neolocality. The position of the bride in her new home is strengthened by the birth of a son. This enhances her status as a woman also and divorces rarely occur in families with male children.

Childbirth and Childhood

Parturition takes place in a sitting position. The mother is assisted by an experienced older woman from the village who acts as midwife. Birth takes place in one of the rooms in the house and the father may be present if he so wishes. The umbilical cord is cut with a pair of scissors or a knife and the newborn infant is wrapped tightly in a cotton blanket. For the first seven days, it is placed on a circular inverted grain sieve which is covered with a thin mattress. (The use of a sieve for the first bed has been reported from Egypt and Iran and is said to be a measure to protect the baby from the evil eye.) After the first week, the infant is placed in a wooden cradle to which it is tightly strapped most of the day. As a rule, children are nursed until their second birthday. If the mother has no milk, a wet nurse is employed.

Boys are preferred to girls; a man will often marry a second wife should the first one fail to have any sons. The Kurds circumcise their sons when they are five days old, or wait until the child is seven years of age. Naming takes place on the seventh day. A mullah (Moslem religious teacher) takes the infant on his knees and whispers the given name to it, repeating the formula seven times: "I call thee....., son (daughter) of our great mother Eve." Following the Arab custom, Kurds have no

105 surnames; the child is addressed by his given name plus that of his father.

Childhood in Kurdistan is a period of preparation for the adult role. Children rarely play and toys of any kind are practically non-existent. At the various age levels, children have specific duties to perform. Girls assist their mothers around the house while the boys work with their fathers in the fields and look after the goats and sheep. Children are well trained with an assured feeling of their position and what is expected of them. There are no recognized transitional periods and they arrive at adulthood with no visible personal or social upheavals.

Family Relations

The ideal for both adults and children is a calm dignified behavior at all times. Children are taught to be obedient, unobtrusive, polite, and industrious. Disobedience to parents, especially to the father, is regarded by Moslems as a cardinal sin.

Following the Moslem pattern, the father or the senior adult male, in theory at least, has complete and unquestionable control in the household. In practice, however, it has been observed that Kurdish women often have considerable influence within the family circle and few have even attained prominence on a tribal level. The father's absolute authority is often challenged by his grown sons as indicated by the high incidence of neolocal residence. Obedience of the female to the male and of the young to the old, however, is still both the ideal and the general rule.

Kinship

105 A striking feature of the Kurdish kinship system is the small number of basic terms employed, totaling twelve in all. In general, especially as far as the male is concerned, affinal relatives are of secondary importance and the basic terms for spouse's father, mother, adult sister and brother suffice. The group of relatives covered by these basic twelve terms is a bilateral kin group, and includes all individuals in the elementary families of which ego or ego's parents are members during their lives. The suffix -aza, literally "child of," indicates removal by one descending generation from this group; repetition of the term indicates two generations' removal. Ascending generations are categorized by constructing similar bilateral units with ego's father or grandfather in the position of ego.

Kurdish kinship terms are thus purely descriptive, in that they measure only genealogical distance between near kin without showing unilineal emphasis.

Political Organization

Kurdish tribal organization is based on a segmentary lineage system of a simple type. A large tribal confederacy called ashiret is divided into a number of tribes or subtribes called tira. The tira is the primary political and landowning group. Membership in it is patrilineally inherited and the tira itself approximates a maximal lineage.

105 It is the largest kinship unit and members must be able to trace their descent from one common ancestor. Genealogical depth of the tiras varies; for some tribes such as the sedentary Hamawands of Iraq, the common ancestor is nine generations removed from the present adult generation. The nomadic Wurda Shatri nearby hold their common ancestor to be twelve generations removed. Each tira is led by a hereditary rais (leader). The leader's position is hereditary within the clan and a new leader must have the approval of the senior male members of the tira. The tiras have traditional rights to specific pastures. Growth of population and internal tension may lead a branch of a tira to split and in time form a new tira. In case of wars or tribal feuds, the leaders of all the tiras meet in council. This council reaches agreement through discussion and has no formal powers. The whole confederacy or ashiret is led by a paramount leader called beg. This position, too, is inherited within one tira or clan. A levy tax is imposed on the member tiras who are required to contribute a number of armed men and servants who serve in the camp of the beg. The whole tira rarely camps in one unit, but generally divides into several tent camps called khel, roughly corresponding to a lineage segment. It is held together by both economic and kinship ties. The khel is led by an older man informally elected because of his prestige, power, and capabilities. Each khel in turn is made up of a number of households (frequently some twenty to thirty). These approximate in size, composition,

105 and roles those of the sedentary village Kurds previously described. Rather than being farmers, the men here are engaged in full time herding and stockbreeding. Thus, primarily due to the close endogamy practiced by the Kurds, the genealogical and the local groups usually coincide, and those same groups are also the organizational units in the formal political sense. Or, stated in a different way, the localized territorial groups occupying separate villages are in effect lineage segments, whose corporate unity is expressed in communal ownership of land, cooperation in herding and irrigation, and the over-all political unity of the tira and ultimately of the ashiret.

The political organization of the nontribal areas is much simpler. Immediately above the village level, external administration takes over. In the village itself, a mukhtar (mayor, headman) is elected to serve as intermediary between the villagers and the administration. More often he is appointed from above in an attempt to achieve a balance of power in the village or to assure full cooperation with the national governments.

External Relations

The Kurds have always been restless under civil governments. No less than six major armed rebellions (some common to more than one government) have been quelled with difficulty in the past twenty-five years. In spite of the centralising policies of the Ottoman and Persian empires, a number of quasi-independent Kurdish principalities survived until the

105 middle of the nineteenth century. After the suppression of these, periodic revolts occurred against the central authority in which the leaders appealed to racial and ethnic sentiment to rally their followers. The political history of the Kurds after 1906 is interwoven with that of the Ottomans and international politics. A small Kurdish colony of 20,000 in Soviet Armenia has been encouraged recently in developing national consciousness and is acting as an example for the rest of the Kurds. The Kurds of Iraq are today in a state of war with the national government and the outcome is unpredictable. This, however, may be the initial step toward the final realization of Kurdistan both as a geographical and a national entity.

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